

**An Analysis of Western Media Depiction of Middle Easterners as Homophobic
and Colonial Origins of Homophobia in the Middle East**

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During the 19th century, Britain raised to an imperial power in the world and colonized a large portions of Asia as well as Africa. Orientalism, a concept introduced by Edward Said, is defined as a way of representing a single image of the East from a European perspective; its purpose is to highlight the cultural differences, and show the “other” as backward and uncivilized. Edward Said believes that the notion of Orient exists to justify the European colonization, and mask the true political-economic intentions. One of the examples of orientalism was a cultural difference observed by the European colonizers in the East: the normality of same-sex activities (Said, 1979). However, this concept does not belong to the past only; it still is relevant today. Ironically, homosexuality was used to “other” Middle Eastern back then, the West exploits homophobia to other Middle Eastern today. The “homophobic Muslim” narrative that has been created by the West is not to protect the sexual orientation freedom from the “dangerous” Muslims. But it is simply a modern day manifestation of Orientalism that merely serves to justify today’s criminal and acts of violence of the West towards the Middle East; invasion of Iraq for natural resources and other political-economical gains. It also justifies the discrimination of Muslim communities who live in Western societies. It is a cultural instance of Gramsci’s hegemony; the public consent is acquired through orientalism for domination and power (Dalacoura, 2014). Despite the depiction by Western media, homophobia does not have a long history in the Middle East and among muslims: It in fact is a legacy of British and French colonization. And the second era of homophobia happened during the 1980’s, Western nations started to be more accepting of LGBT issues, so newly established Islamic fundamentalist groups and governments regarded homosexuality as an attribute of the West that needs to be destroyed in order to protect Islamic identity. When the western media depicts Middle Eastern and Muslims as authentically homophobic, it harms their image in a global level, and has destructive effects on

middle eastern and muslim individuals who are homosexual; they would feel self-contradictions between their Muslim and LGBT identity.

The conservative western media has created a “homophobic Muslim” narrative that has created one single image of Muslims for average Western person. They report the horrible crimes against homosexuals by the governments in the Middle East; one would be sure that Muslim is synonymous with anti-gay. Despite the portrayal by western conservative media and today’s muslim extremists, homophobia is not authentic to neither Islam nor the Middle East. The history of LGBT in the Middle East spans thousands of years. In Iran, homosexuality was not against norms until Qajar dynasty (until early 1900s) (Dalacoura, 2014). In fact, gender segregation and availability of same sex drove individuals to same-sex activities even more. In Egypt, not only was male-male relationship accepted, but also marked with a ceremony (Whitaker, 2016). From 10th to 19th century the work of poets and writers depict an existence and normality of homosexual activities in the Middle East (Dalacoura, 2014). One of those renowned poets was Saadi Shirazi, in 1200’s, who was a Persian muslim poet. His poetry gives us a great understanding of the social norms, and even the laws of his time to some extent. He expresses affection for boys in many poems, with no sense of shame. The fact that he was not publicly hated or never arrested for his poetry, shows that it was socially and legally tolerated (FixQuotes). However, Saadi is not the only Middle Eastern poet to write homoerotic poems; Abu Nuwas, Farokhi, Anvari, Bafghi and Hafez are some of the poets who have expressed their love for boys (Iranica, 2004). Around the same time in Europe, homosexuality was long considered unnatural and was made punishable by death with the Buggery Act 1533 in UK (Jaspal & , 2019). The cultural difference can be seen in old diaries as well: For example, Muhammad al Saffar, the Moroccan scholar, who visited Paris in 1800’s documented: “Flirtation,

romance, and courtship for them take place only with women, for they are not inclined to boys or young men. Rather, that is extremely disgraceful to them” (Saffar & Miller, 1992). It was not until 1960’s that UK decriminalized homosexuality (Kirby, Waites, & Lennox, 2013, p. 70). From 1800’s to 1900’s the British and French colonized most of the Middle Eastern countries, and intervened with the rest. And they established their anti-gay laws in these countries. When the countries got their independence back, the European legacy was still there; only Bahrain and Jordan changed their laws around homosexuality (Whitaker, 2016). Keeping Western citizens uneducated about these historical origins of anti-gay in colonization only helps demonize Muslims and serves to gain the public consent to justify new forms of colonization of resources in the Middle East.

During the 1980’s, the time western world was becoming more and more tolerant towards homosexuality, coincided with a rise of islamic fundamentalism in the Middle East. This newly formed cultural difference fuelled anti-Muslim sentiments in the West, and especially the United States (Dalacoura, 2014). Hamas, an Islamic resistance movement in Palestine, Al-Qaeda, an extremist organization and Egyptian Islamic Jihad were among the Islamic fundamentalist groups in the region that were formed in the 1980’s. In Iran, the new Islamic government was ruled by the supreme leader Ayatollah Khomeini who was determined to rid Iran of any western corruption, and establish an Islamic constitution. When the HIV epidemic was followed by LGBT rights movements in Europe and America, conservative politicians in the Middle Eastern countries associated homosexuality with west. In a speech, the current supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei referred to homosexuality as a western influence when he stated “The main objectives of the Revolution included: Islamic governance, ... and resistance to the flooding of the ravaging moral decay, which has been coming out from the West to the rest of the

planet.” (International, 2016) Similarly, Hizbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah claimed “There are societies abroad that were ruined by homosexuality, and now they are exporting it to Lebanon” (Memri, 2017). Yes, these leaders are violating human rights of homosexual individuals, but western media considers muslims as a ‘threat’ to sexual orientation freedom, while the formation of these resistance groups were a response to Western interference in national matters of Middle Eastern countries. The media disregards the fact that these extremists do not represent all Muslims and the reality of Islam. Platforms such as Fox News portray Islam as they wish: a religion that opposes homosexuality, while Quran, the holy book of Islam, has little to say about homosexuality. And the ‘opposition’ of islam to homosexuality is based on the Lot story which appears in Bible too. The fact that Christianity does not get the same treatment further proves that the “homophobic Muslim” is simply a form of racism and white supremacy. Quran condemns the people of town where prophet Lot was sent to, not homosexuality directly. The narration is ambiguous, therefore, one could interpret that it was the aggressiveness, rape, greed and unfaithfulness of the people that was condemned. Furthermore, there is no document of prophet Muhammad prosecuting anyone for homosexuality.

Just like any other cultural issue, this phenomenon cannot be simplified either, and there are many complications and controversies that need to be taken into consideration. This paper is not aiming to claim that same-sex relationships were in perfect conditions in private and public sphere before the interference of British and French colonizers in the Middle East. There was an absolute dark side to it; in many cases, these homosexual relationships had a pederasty nature, which is inappropriate and unethical. Due to the patriarchal structure of society, workplaces included majorly only men and younger boys who served as pages. This surely suggests an imbalanced power dynamic, or even nonconsensual relations, as we can see in many homoerotic

poems from 10th century to 16th century. For instance, in this poem by Suzani, Persian poet in 11th century expresses his admiration for the young beauty “Be mindful, o boy, that you would not grow a beard / So that a beard would not plunge you in sorrow and grief, o boy!” (Iranica, 2004) Moreover, these male-male relationships are partially rooted in the patriarchy and misogyny in the Middle East; women were mostly considered objects of household with the sole purposes of serving and reproduction. So men considered men worthy of romance and companionship, while women only worthy of taking care of domestic matters (Iranica, 2004). There sure were flaws, and while some may argue otherwise, that does not justify the intervention of colonizers in a regions culture and laws. Just like how western nation that have not been colonized progressed in civil rights for different social groups, Middle Eastern countries also were on their path to improve conditions around homosexuality. But that was ruined by colonization and rise of islamic fundamentalism as a resistive response to it. For instance, in Iran, right before the Islamic revolution, the Shah’s government tolerated homosexuality more than ever before (History News Network, 2009). Despite all these flaws, it is destructive to keep the society uneducated about the history of homosexuality in the Middle East, and manipulate them into believing that same-sex acts have never existed or accepted in that region.

For years, western conservative media platforms have been portraying Middle Eastern and muslims as a threat to freedom and neoliberal democracy. And in more recent years with progress in LGBT rights in west, they are exploiting LGBT issues as a new way to demonize muslim community. The shooting of Orlando gay bar by Omar Mateen, an American Muslim was used to associate Islam with homophobia, while the same reaction happen with hate crimes were done by terrorists of other religions, for instance, Eric Rudolph massacre (Greenwald, 2016). In a news article, Fox News claimed that Islam had a role in homophobia, and that this

was an instance of radical islamic terrorism and a declaration of war against western freedom (Chesler, 2016). Ironically, Omar Mateen had no signs of religious fundamentalism, had records of mental illness, and most importantly was proved to be gay himself (Greenwald, 2016). This was not an instance of radical islamic terrorism, but an instance of the damage caused by reinforcing “homophobic Muslim” narrative on Muslim LGBT persons. Another Fox News article is titled “Hundreds of Muslim parents protest school in Britain over LGBT curriculum”. Painting Middle Eastern and Muslims as the face of homophobia is just a new form of white supremacy, and disregards the thousands years of homosexuality in the Middle East and origins of homophobia, which is deeply rooted in British and French colonization. This hatred towards Muslims only paves the way for wars in the middle east to exploit resources in the name of freedom.

The demonization of Muslims and stereotyping them as homophobic is 21st century version of “other”ing Middle Easterners, depicting them as backward, uncivilized and even dangerous. Western media tries to hide the long history of LGBT in the Middle East, and the fact that anti-gay laws was established by the Western colonizers in that region. They create a single image of Middle Easterners by reporting and making documentaries of horrible violations of LGBT rights in the Middle East. They exploit any homophobic act, or crime hate done by Muslim individuals in Western societies to associate Islam with anti-gay. And this is just one of the many examples of how orientalism is very much still relevant; former colonizer nations still continue to exaggerate cultural differences in order to justify their brutal criminal acts. A Deep analysis of the roots of this complex issue suggests that Western LGBT rights movements will not help the conditions for homosexuals in Middle Eastern countries and communities. However, the possible ways to improve the situation starts from understanding and then taking actions

towards the very origins of homophobia in the region, as well as among Muslim communities in the Western societies. Middle Easterners need to unlearn the wrong interpretations of Quran, they need to learn the history that was hidden from the public, and need to know that homophobia is not synonymous with Muslim or Middle Eastern identity. Then, they need to educate other communities and fight the biased Western media narrative and show them neither Islam is a religion of hate, nor Middle Eastern is a culture of aggression. And it is time they stop fabricating narratives for political-economical gains.

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